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UNIT 1

Christopher Columbus and the New World

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Christopher Columbus, more accurately known as Cristoforo Colombo or Cristóbal Colón, was born either in or near Genoa, Italy, in 1451. He was the son of a weaver and probably worked with his father at the craft from an early age. Columbus sailed on a trading mission to Flanders in 1476, but the ship he was on was sunk by the French off the Portuguese coast at Lagos. Columbus managed to swim ashore and proceeded to travel 160 miles to Lisbon, where his brother Bartholomé was working. Lisbon at that time was a very important center for European exploration and navigation.

In Lisbon, Columbus worked as a merchant seaman and sailed to the British Isles and perhaps Iceland. He met with enough success to be able to marry a lady of an upstanding family of the Madeira Islands. He settled in the Madeiras and made more voyages as a traveling merchant. At this time Columbus probably taught himself how to read and write and learned some Latin, Spanish, and Portuguese. He also studied the new printed materials on navigation and many of the maps being produced. Columbus became convinced that a shortcut to Asia lay in going west across the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus tried many different times to interest European powers in supporting his voyage of exploration to the west. He approached the king of Portugal as well as monarchs of Spain (Castile), England, and France. Finally, in 1492, Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain agreed to sponsor Columbus. He received three ships for his expedition, money for crew and supplies, the right to receive ten percent of any

trade he began, and the governorship over any new land. In August of 1492, Columbus and his expedition set sail for Asia.

In October 1492, Columbus arrived on land that he assumed was one of the outer islands of Cipangu (Japan). Upon going ashore, Columbus claimed the land for the king and queen of Spain and met the natives, whom he referred to as Indians, since he supposed he was in the East Indies. Columbus took seven natives as prisoners and hoped that they would lead him to the grand khan (emperor of China) and the gold Columbus hoped to find. Instead, he discovered the island of Cuba and then sailed to an island that he named Española, where his flagship, the Santa Maria, hit a reef. The local chieftain, or cacique, of the island, Guacanagari, sent Columbus presents, which included some items of gold. Guacanagari also helped Columbus salvage supplies from his foundering ship. Columbus used the timbers from the abandoned ship to build a fort on the island, which he called Puerto de Navidad. To awe the natives into submission, Columbus fired rounds from his cannons, which terrified the cacique and his people.

In January 1493, 38 men were left to defend the fort. Columbus sailed for home, taking with him some Taino Indians to be shown to the Spanish rulers. Upon reporting to the king and queen about his findings, which he embellished to include such riches as spices and precious metals, Columbus received the title "Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of the islands he has discovered in the Indies." A second expedition was mounted that year with 17

ships, which carried supplies, animals, and over a thousand men, some with their families.

Columbus explored some of the islands of the Lesser Antilles, but ultimately he returned to La Navidad on Española, known today as the Dominican Republic and Haiti. He found the fort abandoned and the men he had left there, dead. The soldiers had enslaved the Taino women and mistreated the Indians and had been killed in reprisal. Columbus explored the eastern part of Española and found some sources of gold in an area called Cibao. Desperate to turn a profit and prove to the Spanish crown that his voyage was fruitful, Columbus forced the Tainos to pay a tribute every three months to the Spanish consisting of enough gold dust to fill a hawk's bell. He also shipped Indians to Spain to be sold as slaves. During this second voyage to the New World, Columbus often left the small Spanish colony of Española in the hands of others, such as his brother Diego, and went to explore the other islands.

In 1496, Columbus sailed back to Spain to defend his reputation against detractors who accused him of poor administration and of not producing the spices and gold he had promised. Despite a rather lukewarm welcome, Columbus

did receive funding to go on a third voyage and left Spain in May 1498. Three of his six ships went directly to Española, but Columbus took three ships and explored what is today Trinidad and the coastline of South America. Columbus then returned to Española, which he found in chaos. The colony was suffering from illness, hunger, and infighting among the Spanish. The royal government sent out a commissioner to try to restore order. Columbus and his brothers, Diego and Bartholomé, were arrested and sent back to Spain shackled in irons in 1500.

After two years of pleading his case, Columbus was given permission by the Spanish monarchs to try once more to find China. In 1502, he set sail with four worm-eaten ships and tried to land at Española, where permission was denied by the present governor. Columbus then explored the coast of Central America and landed in Panama. He was also marooned on the island of Jamaica for a year. Finally, the company was rescued by a relief ship and made their way to Española. In September 1504, Columbus returned to Spain. He spent the last two years of his life writing letters to the Spanish court complaining of his treatment. In 1506, Columbus died at Valladolid, Spain.

Key Questions About This Subject

- What was Columbus' reason for undertaking his voyage west across the Atlantic Ocean?
- Upon his discovery of the islands of the Caribbean and the indigenous peoples there, how did Columbus attempt to make this venture worthwhile to his sponsors, the king and queen of Spain?
- Can Columbus be held personally accountable for the devastation visited upon the indigenous peoples by the Spaniards?
- What was the most serious calamity to befall the indigenous peoples of the Americas?
- Who was responsible for this? Could anyone be declared morally responsible?
- Were the actions of the Spanish any more cruel and reprehensible than those that the native leaders (such as the Aztec chiefs and priests) inflicted upon their own people?
- Given that Europeans would eventually have reached the Western Hemisphere, and given the conditions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, can you see any scenario in which Europeans and Native Americans could have met and established peaceful relations?

Mock Trial

If you are going to hold a simulated trial, here are the charges against Christopher Columbus (the Defendant): Christopher Columbus, a Genoese seaman in the service of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, is accused of crimes against humanity and the environment, in that he and his men were responsible for the deaths of many of the indigenous people referred to by Columbus as “Indians.” Columbus also stands accused of causing ecological devastation through the importing of plant and animal life not native to the Western Hemisphere.

DOCUMENTS

Document A

A Letter to Lord Sanchez, 1493

(From *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus*, translated and edited by R.H. Major. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1847, pp. 6–10. As found in Dennis Sherman, ed., *Western Civilization: Sources, Images, and Interpretation from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995, pp. 53–54.)

The inhabitants of both sexes in this island, and in all the others which I have seen, or of which I have received information, go always naked as they were born, with the exception of some of the women, who use the covering of leaf, or small bough, or an apron of cotton which they prepare for that purpose. None of them . . . are possessed of any iron, neither have they weapons, being unacquainted with, and indeed incompetent to use them, not from any deformity of body (for they are well-formed), but because they are timid and full of fear. . . . This timidity did not arise from any loss or injury that they received from us; for on the contrary, I gave to all I approached whatever articles I had about me, such as cloth and many other things, taking nothing of theirs in return: but they are naturally timid and fearful. As soon however as they see that they are safe, and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest, and exceedingly liberal with all they have; none of them refusing any thing he may possess when he is asked for it, but on the contrary inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love towards all others in preference to themselves: they also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return. I however forbade that these trifles and articles of no value (such as pieces of dishes, plates, and glass, keys, and leather straps) should be given to them, although if they could obtain them, they imagined themselves to be possessed of the most beautiful trinkets in the world. . . . Thus they bartered, like idiots, cotton and gold for fragments of bows, glasses, bottles, and jars; which I forbade as being unjust, and myself gave them many beautiful and acceptable articles which I had brought with me, taking nothing from them in return; I did this in order that I might the more easily conciliate them, that they might be led to become Christians, and might be inclined to entertain a regard for the King and Queen, our Princes and all Spaniards, and that I might induce them to take an interest in seeking out, and collecting, and delivering to us such things as they possessed in abundance, but which we greatly needed. . . . On my arrival at that sea, I had taken some Indians by force from the first island that I came to, in order that they might

learn our language and communicate to us what they knew respecting the country; which plan succeeded excellently, and was a great advantage to us. . . . In all these islands there is no difference of physiognomy, of manners, or of language, but they all clearly understand each other, a circumstance very propitious for the realization of what I conceive to be the principal wish of our most serene King, namely, the conversion of these people to the holy faith of Christ, to which indeed, as far as I can judge, they are very favourable and well-disposed.

Document B

Hispaniola

(From Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, pp. 32–35. Originally published in Spanish in 1552.)

On the island of Hispaniola was where the Spaniards first landed, as I have said. Here those Christians perpetrated their first ravages and oppressions against the native peoples. This was the first land in the New World to be destroyed and depopulated by the Christians, and here they began their subjection of the women and children, taking them away from the Indians to use them and ill use them, eating the food they provided with their sweat and toil. The Spaniards did not content themselves with what the Indians gave them of their own free will, according to their ability, which was always too little to satisfy enormous appetites, for a Christian eats and consumes in one day an amount of food that would suffice to feed three houses inhabited by ten Indians for one month. And they committed other acts of force and violence and oppression which made the Indians realize that these men had not come from Heaven. And some of the Indians concealed their foods while others concealed their wives and children and still others fled to the mountains to avoid the terrible transactions of the Christians. . . .

From that time onward the Indians began to seek ways to throw the Christians out of their lands. They took up arms, but their weapons were very weak and of little service in offense and still less in defense. And the Christians, with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike. They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!" Other infants they put to the sword along with their mothers and anyone else who happened to be nearby. . . . They usually dealt with the chieftains and nobles in the following way: they made a grid of rods which they placed on forked sticks, then lashed the victims to the grid and lighted a smoldering fire underneath, so that little by little, as those captives screamed in despair and torment, their souls would leave them.

The Great Disease Migration

(From Cowley, Geoffrey, "The Great Disease Migration," *Newsweek*, Special Issue, Fall/Winter, 1991. pp. 54–56.)

. . . Many experts now believe that the New World was home to 40 million to 50 million people before Columbus arrived and that most of them died within decades. In Mexico alone, the native population fell from roughly 30 million in 1519 to 3 million in 1568. There was similar devastation throughout the Caribbean islands, Central America and Peru. The eminent Yale historian David Brion Davis says this was "the greatest genocide in the history of man." Yet it's increasingly clear that most of the carnage had nothing to do with European barbarism. The worst of the suffering was caused not by swords or guns but by germs.

Contrary to popular belief, viruses, bacteria and other invisible parasites aren't designed to cause harm; they fare best in the struggle to survive and reproduce when they don't destroy their hosts. But when a new germ invades a previously unexposed population, it often causes devastating epidemics, killing all but the most resistant individuals. . . .

By the time Columbus set sail, the people of the Old World held the distinction of being thoroughly diseased. By domesticating pigs, horses, sheep and cattle, they had infected themselves with a wide array of pathogens. And through centuries of war, exploration, and city-building, they had kept those agents in constant circulation. Virtually any European who crossed the Atlantic during the 16th century had battled such illnesses as smallpox and measles during childhood and emerged fully immune.

By contrast, the people of the Americas had spent thousands of years in biological isolation. . . . By the time Columbus had arrived, groups like the Aztecs and Maya of Central America and Peru's Incas had built cities large enough to sustain major epidemics. Archeological evidence suggests they suffered from syphilis, tuberculosis, a few intestinal parasites and some types of influenza (probably those carried by waterfowl). Yet they remained untouched by diseases that had raged for centuries in the Old World. When the newcomers arrived carrying mumps, measles, whooping cough, smallpox, cholera, gonorrhea and yellow fever, the Indians were immunologically defenseless.

Document D

An illustration of an Aztec human sacrifice (located at the Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico City)



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The Aztecs believed that the gods who had created the world needed human blood to sustain it. Hearts were removed from the victims' chests and offered as a sacrifice to the sun.



The Aztecs

(From the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Aztecs: Reign of Blood and Splendor*. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1992, pp. 82–83.)

Driven by fear of the gods, particularly Huitzilopochtli, the Aztecs performed human sacrifice on a scale unknown either before or since in history. The conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo was an eyewitness to this bloodletting and wrote vividly of the fate of some of his friends, whom the Aztecs had captured during the climactic battle between the Indians and the Spaniards for control of the city in the spring of 1521. From the place to which Diaz had been forced to retreat, he could see the temple. At the terrifying sound of the Huitzilopochtli shrine drum, which was accompanied by the blare of conchs, horns, and trumpetlike instruments, Diaz glanced toward the Great Temple and saw that some of his comrades, who had been captured by the Aztecs, were being dragged to the top to be sacrificed. When the Indians had gotten them “to a small square where their accursed idols are kept,” recounted Diaz in the breathless style of someone who has beheld horror and never been able to forget it, “we saw them place plumes on the head of many of our men and with things like fans in their hands they forced them to dance before Huitzilopochtli, and after they had danced they placed them on their backs on some rather narrow stones which had been prepared as places for sacrifice, and with stone knives they sawed open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols that were there, and they kicked the bodies down the steps, and Indian butchers who were waiting below cut off the arms and feet and flayed the skin off the faces, and prepared it afterward like glove leather with the beards on, and kept those for the festivals when they celebrated drunken orgies, and the flesh they ate with chilies.”

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Media Resources

Documentaries

- Christopher Columbus and the Great Adventure*. 28 minutes. Video Knowledge, 1991. Good overview of the Columbus voyages and their impact on the peoples of the Americas. Available from Zenger Media, 800-421-4246.
- Columbus and the Age of Discovery*. 60 minutes each part. PBS, 1990. This seven-part series produced for the Columbus quincentennial is highly recommended. Presently out of distribution, but possibly available in public school libraries.
- 500 Nations*. 49 minutes each part. Columbia House, 1994. Eight-part series exploring various aspects of native North American culture. The first three programs are pertinent to the time of Columbus. Available as a set or as separate videos from Zenger Media, 800-421-4246.

Feature Films

- Christopher Columbus*. 135 minutes. Warner Home Video, 1985. Originally 360 minutes, this two-part Italian-U.S. television miniseries has been edited for general distribution.
- Christopher Columbus: The Discovery*. 120 minutes. 1992. Directed by Alexander Salkind, this film concerns the efforts of Columbus to convince the Spanish monarchs to sponsor his voyage. Includes a fictional meeting between Columbus and the grand inquisitor, Torquemada, played by Marlon Brando. Available in many video stores.
- 1492: Conquest of Paradise*. 152 minutes. 1992. Directed by Ridley Scott and starring Gerard Depardieu as Columbus. Available at many video stores.